**THE FACTS**

**WRITTEN:**  Shakespeare wrote the play in 1602 between “Troilus and Cressida” and “Measure for Measure”; all three “comedies” are considered to be Shakespeare’s “Problem Plays”.

**PUBLISHED:** The play was not published until its inclusion twenty-one years later in the 1623 Folio.

**AGE:** The Bard was 38 years old when he wrote the play. (Shakespeare B.1564-D.1616)

**CHRONO:** The play falls in 25th place in the canon of 39 plays -- a dark period in Shakespeare’s writing, coincidentally just prior to the 1603 recurrence of bubonic plague which temporarily closed the theaters off and on until the Great Fire of London in 1666 which effectively halted the tragic epidemic.

**GENRE:** Even though the play is considered a “comedy” it defies being placed in that genre. “Modern criticism has sought other terms than comedy and the label ‘problem play’ was first attached to it in 1896 by English scholar, Frederick S. Boas.

Frederick S. Boas (1896): The play produces neither “simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed; for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome”.

The Arden Shakespeare scholars add to Boas’ comments: “This is arguably the very source of the play’s interest for us, as it
complicates and holds up for criticism the wish-fulfilling logic of comedy itself. Helena desires to assure herself and us that: ‘All’s well that ends well yet, / Though time seems so adverse and means unfit.’ Even if the action ‘ends well’, the ‘means unfit’ by which it does so must challenge the comic claim. All is not automatically well that ‘yet seems well’, and dramatic actions that end well may be comic only in the most formal sense.”

**SOURCE:** “The story of the healing of a king and the satisfying of apparently impossible conditions by the young heroine is the stuff of folklore. Shakespeare seems to have read it in William Painter’s 1566 translation of the ninth story on the third day in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* written in 1353; he follows the plot closely, but has darkened its outline and sharpened the social particularity of its characters. The character of Parolles is a Shakespeare addition.” (Arden Shakespeare)

**FIRST:** No records of the early performances of “All’s Well That Ends Well” have been found. It was not until 1741 (139 years later) when a production at the Drury Lane Theater demanded attention due to tales of company illnesses earning it the title of an “unlucky play” (much like “The Scottish Play”) which may well have curtailed the number of subsequent revivals. Various actors of the day beginning in the 1770’s popularized the roles of Parolles but the play was performed only sporadically well into the late 19th century.

**CRITICISM:** In proportion to its actual dramatic and literary merits, the play remains Shakespeare’s most undervalued comedy. Alas, it’s long history of unpopularity has remained constant.

“Fundamentally, we -- like the master of all Shakespeare critics, Samuel Johnson – seem to misunderstand the play. We cannot abide Bertram, the caddish young nobleman whom the evidently-admirable Helena loves....Bertram has no saving qualities; to call him a spoiled brat is not anachronistic. Samuel Johnson particularly resented the happy ending with Bertram settling into supposed domestic bliss.” (Bloom)
Mr. Johnson wrote “I cannot reconcile my heart to Bertram, a man noble without generosity and young without truth who marries Helena as a coward and leaves her as a profligate; when she is dead by his unkindness, sneaks home to a second marriage, is accused by a woman whom he has wronged, defends himself by falsehood, and is dismissed to happiness.”

OTHERS: To add some little praise, George Bernard Shaw thought the role of the Countess to be “the most beautiful old woman’s part ever written.” He also greatly admired Helena’s character, comparing her with the “New Woman” figures such as Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House”.

Considering Bertram’s oft-criticized behavior throughout the play, it is interesting to note that the objections of Victorian audiences “centered on the character of Helena who was variously deemed ‘predatory’, ‘immodest’ and both ‘really despicable’ and a ‘doormat’. Famous actress Ellen Terry in 1932 accused her of ‘hunting men down in the most undignified way’.” (Bloom)

QUOTES: Parolles: “Who cannot be crush’d with a plot?” (Act IV, Sc 3, 319)

Helena: “All’s well that ends well yet, / Though time seem so adverse and means unfit.”(Act V, Sc 1, 25-26) (Editor’s note: Does the “happy” end ever justify the “foul” means?)

Lord I: “The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together; our virtues would be proud if our faults whipp’d them not, and our crimes would despair if there were cherish’d by our virtues.” (Act IV, Sc 3,68-71)

ACTORS: Slowly gaining popularity since the mid 1920’s, theater greats like Laurence Olivier (as a “glossy” Parolles) in 1927 and Catherine Lacey as Helena during the 1940 “heavy daylight air raids” have tackled the “problems” of the play. Finally, in 1953 a high successful production at Stratford, Ontario starred Alec Guinness as the King and Irene Worth as Helena. A more highly praised production at the same theater in 1959 was directed by Tyrone Guthrie and starred Edith Evans as the Countess, Zoe Caldwell as Helena and Robert Hardy as
the King.

**RECENT:** The 2004 production of the play at the Royal Shakespeare Company featured a star performance by Judy Dench as the Countess and Claudie Blakley as Helena. The 2009 mounting of the play by director Marianne Elliott (“War Horse”, “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time”) gained rave reviews at the National Theater.

**FILM:** See film resources listed at the conclusion of this document.

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**THE PLAY**

**SETTING:** Much of the action of the play unfolds in the area of **Roussillon, France** just north of the Pyrenees with its eastern edge on the Mediterranean Sea. (Through much of its history Roussillon – sometimes spelled Rousillon and other times Rossillon; the double “ll” is pronounced as a “y” – was part of Aragon – sometimes Spain and sometimes France. The area became a permanent part of France in 1659.)

The play also moves, oftentimes in rapid succession, to the King’s Palace in **Paris**, the Duke’s Palace and fortifications in **Florence**, Italy; the Widow’s house in Florence and briefly to **Marseilles** as Helen searches for the King at the end of the war.

**YEAR:** **Probably 1555.** Historically, Florence and Siena (72 km to the south) were rivals for centuries. In the 16th century there was a great rivalry between King Francis I of France and Emperor Charles V of Austria with the latter possessing much of France most of the time. In 1552 a three year battle ensued between the two cities with Austria arming Siena. From the announcement of a “peace concluded” in Act IV, Sc 3, 38 we may assume that the war has ended which it did in 1555. In 1557 Florence finally gained political control of Siena and the latter’s history as an independent city-state came to an end.
**KEY ROLES:**

**KING OF FRANCE:** A gentle and grateful king of “autumnally wistful regal dignity”. (J.C. Trewin, Simon and Schuster, “Shakespeare’s Plays”)

**COUNTESS OF ROSSILLON:** The mother of Bertram, the mistress of Rousillon and Helena's guardian, she is a wise, discerning grande dame who perceives Helena’s worth and rejoices when she marries Bertram. When Bertram treats Helena badly, the Countess is quick to condemn his behavior.

**HELENA, WARD OF THE COUNTESS OF ROSSILLON:** The play's undaunted but confusing heroine. The orphan daughter of a great doctor, she is the ward of the Countess of Rossillon, and hopelessly in love with the Countess' son, Bertram. Her good qualities are attested to by nearly every character in the play, and events prove her a resourceful and determined woman who is not easily discouraged by setbacks. What qualities she possibly sees in the “glittering emptiness” of Bertram frequently confuse audiences and lend to the play's clouded label as a “problem play”. How can Helena be so massively wrong?

**BERTRAM, COUNT OF ROSSILLON:** In the opinion of many critics since his first stage entrance in 1602 the young, self-centered and downright mean Bertram is one of Shakespeare’s weakest and most unpleasant heroes. “He is an empty-headed snob and nothing more. Bertram is authentically noxious.....The insufferable nobleman goes out on the right note of ludicrous insincerity with ‘I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly’ which is at least one ‘ever’ too many.” (Bloom) “War is not strife / To the dark house and the detested wife.” (Act II, Sc 3, 290-291)

**DUKE OF FLORENCE:** A proud protector of his great city whose battles with neighboring Siena are endangered by that’s city’s support from the Emperor of Austria. The Duke is most appreciative of the support offered in battles by the Lords of Rossillon and other towns of France who helped in his success.

**PAROLLES:** Despite the scores of nasty comments made about him, “the fake soldier whose name aptly means ‘words’ is a splendid scoundrel, perfectly transparent to anyone of good sense, which of course does not include Bertram......Parolles is a mere braggart soldier, an impostor, a liar, a leech but considerably more interesting than the warring and whoring Bertram....He is the spiritual center of the play, the emblem of the rancidity that underlies its courtly surfaces. The play’s bitterness is condensed into his vow to survive after his exposure and ruin......Parolles is not in the play as Bertram’s dark angel; rather he represents what Shakespeare always loathed – mindless fashion, time-serving mock gentility, false courage and the domain of the lie.” (Bloom)
THE LORDS DUMAINE: Two French Lords -- oddly of the same name thus Lord 1 and Lord 2 -- serving with Bertram and instrumental in the planning and execution of the gulling scheme with Parolles.

LAFEW (or Lafeu): An elderly Lord in the Countess’s manor who accompanies Bertram to the Palace of the ailing King of France. He subsequently introduces Helena to the King in her valiant efforts and success in curing his maladies. With wisdom and experience Lafew becomes more significant later in the sub-plot; we learn that Parolles “was first smok’d” by the Lord. (Act III, Sc 6, 98). And, it is to Lafew whom Parolles approaches after his fall: “It lies in you, my lord, to bring me in some grace, for you did bring me out.” Lafew’s endearing call of “Tom Drum” is the only kind word said to or about Parolles in the play.

CLOWN LAVACHE: A typically bothersome character of convoluted pseudo wisdom and twisted babble whose role at the Manor of Rossillon is frowned upon by Lefew and even further by the very Countess herself.

WIDOW CAPILET: A kind and hospitable woman of little means but considerable pride, she is particularly protective of her daughter’s virginity and honor. The Widow immediately recognizes the honesty and determination of the gentlewoman Helena and aids in every possible way with her “bed-fellow switching” plan.

DIANA, DAUGHTER OF WIDOW CAPILET: The daughter of the Widow Capilet is of exceptional beauty in the rake Bertram’s estimation. Her wily cleverness is evident as she replies convincingly and mockingly to Bertram’s first refusal to yield his ring (Act IV, Sc 2, 45-49):

“Mine honour’s such a ring;
My chastity’s the jewel of our house....
Which were the greatest obloquy I’th’world
In me to lose.”

OTHER ROLES: See the additional document with visual groupings of characters: “The Countess’ Manor”, “Bertrams’s Cadre” and “The Royals”.

SYNOPSIS: Act 1
The Countess of Rossillon, her son Bertram, and her ward Helena are all dressed in black for the Count’s funeral. Helena, who is of lower birth than Bertram, reveals in a soliloquy that she loves him. The King of France is unwell with a fistula, but none of his physicians can heal him. The one man who could have done is Helena’s father, who is also dead. Helena proposes that she go to Paris
and try to cure the King’s ailment, and asks the Countess for her blessing and permission to go. The Countess agrees, after confronting Helena about her love for Bertram, which she has heard about from a steward who overheard Helena proclaiming her love, when she thought she was alone.

Act 2
Helena arrives in Paris and is granted an audience with the King, whom she (eventually) manages to persuade to let her try to cure him. If she fails and her botched attempt to heal him kills him, she is prepared to be executed; but if she succeeds in curing him, she asks in return that she be allowed to ask for the hand in marriage of any available nobleman in the kingdom. The King agrees to this request, Helena’s cure works, and she is allowed to choose which nobleman she wishes to marry. She chooses Bertram, who objects to the match on the grounds that she is only a ‘poor physician’s daughter’ and so of too lowly birth. The King says he can provide Bertram with a dowry to marry Helena, but still Bertram objects. The King forces him to accept her. In response, Bertram decides to leave France and go to Italy to fight in the wars. Parolles agrees to accompany him.

Act 3
The Countess receives a letter from her son explaining why he has left for Italy; shortly afterwards, Helena appears, also brandishing a letter from Bertram. The letter cruelly informs her that until she possesses the ring he wears on his finger (which he plans never to remove) and is bearing his child, he will not come back to France and accept her as his wife. Helena promptly leaves France for Italy, to go in search of Bertram and find a way of fulfilling these two seemingly impossible conditions. Helena arrives and tracks down Bertram and Parolles to Florence, where she meets a widow, along with the widow’s friend Mariana and her daughter, Diana. Helena learns that Bertram has been visiting Diana every night in an attempt to woo her, so Helena hatches a plan, which the widow agrees to: they will tell Diana to agree to Bertram’s requests, with Helena taking the place of Diana in the bedroom. Diana then tells Bertram she will sleep with him, but he must give her his ring as a pledge. When ‘they’ make love (with Helena taking the place of Diana), Helena gives Bertram her ring.

Act 4
Meanwhile, as this ‘bed trick’ is being hatched, a group of soldiers fighting with Parolles and Bertram in the army decide to trick the cocky Parolles by pretending to be foreign soldiers ambushing him and taking him prisoner. They threaten to torture him and he readily gives away information about the army to his fellow soldiers (not realizing that they’re his fellow soldiers, of course). Exposed as a coward and someone who will dish the dirt on his best friend to save his own skin, Parolles goes down in Bertram’s estimation. While this is going on, Diana
agrees to let Bertram come to her bedroom that night, but only after he pledges his ring to her as a sign of his good intentions. Some lords learn from a letter that Helena undertook a pilgrimage and is apparently dead (Bertram is, of course, unaware that Helena has come to Italy to track him down). With the war now over and thus thinking it safe to return to France, Bertram leaves Florence and returns home.

**Act 5**

Having returned to France, Bertram makes plans to wed the daughter of Lafew, an old lord. Bertram gives Lafew his ring as pledge, but the King recognizes it as the one he gave to Helena (Bertram, of course, thinks he got the ring from Diana). Diana then shows up and tells them that Bertram has bedded her and pledged to marry her, so he must do so. As proof, she produces the ring he gave her the night ‘they’ slept together. Bertram denies it all, and the King orders Diana to be thrown in prison – until Helena shows up, visibly pregnant, and to the shock of everyone who thought she was dead. She produces the ring Bertram gave her (thinking her to be Diana) when they made love, and Bertram says he will accept her as his wife.

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**FOR OPTIONAL VIEWING or LISTENING.....**

**YOUTUBE (MEAGER RESOURCES) - FREE**

**SCENES FROM THE PLAY**

**Royal Shakespeare Company (2013)**

Act 1, Sc 3 Countess of Rossillon (Charlotte Cornwell) & Helena (Joanna Horton)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdRMH8KtULs&list=PLWhjYKlqMscEZ97gk6mcHwbM8DQTK2eBR&index=2

**Shakespeare’s Globe London (2012)**

Act 5, Sc 3

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=all%27s+well+that+ends+well
**AUDIO RECORDING**

**BBC Classics Production – Full Play**
Distinguished Company of Current British Actors including Marianne Margolyes (Countess) and Simon Russell Beale (Parolles)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rj0rLQ5zrVU&list=PLWhjYKlqMscEZ97gk6mcHwbM8DQTK2eBR&index=17

**FULL AMATEUR PRODUCTION (Filmed Live)**

Plainfield Little Theater, Vermont (2016) Modern Dress
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdvKjDiChlA&list=PLWhjYKlqMscEZ97gk6mcHwbM8DQTK2eBR&index=16

**IMDB – RENT**

**IMDb PRO – RENT (30 Day Free Trial)**
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2534684/mediaviewer/rm2472333824IMDb BRITBOX or AMAZON PRIME VIDEO– RENT (14 Day Free Trial)

BBC The Shakespeare Collections – TV Movie (1981) (“a bit lifeless”)  
With Celia Johnson (Countess), Ian Charleston (Bertram), Peter Jeffrey (Parolles)

**NETFLIX - RENT**

**NETFLIX - MEMBERSHIP**
BBC The Shakespeare Collections – TV Movie (1981) (“a bit lifeless”)  
With Celia Johnson (Countess), Ian Charleston (Bertram), Peter Jeffrey (Parolles)
https://dvd.netflix.com/Movie/All-s-Well-That-Ends-Well/70065077

**FILMS OF OTHER PRODUCTIONS ARE ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE ON EBAY, AMAZON AND WALMART**